

GEORGE ELIOT'S THE MILL ON THE FLOSS: AN APPROACH TO FEMINISM

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ABSTRACT

Feminism is an approach of analyzing the position of women in a patriarchal society or discussing the women's issues and thereby stirring the reader's perception to correct the inequities that women have been imperiled. There have been many great feminists who contributed greatly to the Feminist Movement, but George Eliot has been a knot of controversy among feminist critics regarding her treatment of women's concerns. The current paper hopes to resolve this alleged perplexity by drawing on a primarily feminist perspective. It is a modest effort to explore George Eliot's views on the question of gender. Among the questions, it sets out to resolve is whether Eliot's depiction of woman has contributed to the patriarchal society's subjection and suppression of women or conversely she has attempted to challenge and abolish Male dogmatism and dominance.

The Mill on the Floss highlights the suffering experienced by women in a male-dominated society in detail; and brings out the absurdity of rituals and customs which help to propagate the myth of the patriarchal society. It actually includes the holistic story of the plight of Maggie who is a victim of gross gender discrimination. Maggie suffers intensely both as a child and as a grown up girl. She suffers a lot when she has to renounce her lover. The renouncing of her lover is the most heart rending from the reader's point of view. George Eliot's concept of renunciation has received much criticism because renunciation means giving in. The novel can be defended as "Renunciation" in this novel is linked with independence and perhaps the only independence possible to a woman in Maggie's situation.

KEYWORDS: *Feminism, George Eliot, The Mill on the Floss, Gender Discrimination, Male Dogmatism, Domination, Patriarchal Society, Maggie, Renunciation, Independence*

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INTRODUCTION

George Eliot is one of the most extraordinary woman novelists of the Victorian age whose fiction is recurrently concerned with an attempt to work through the moral dilemmas of young women in a patriarchal society. Of all her works, *The Mill on the Floss*, published in 1860, was a great success. If George Eliot was famous before, she was doubly famous after the publication of this novel. It has been "a scandal and fascination to feminist critics"[1]. Like *Middlemarch*, it is frequently studied by them for its consideration of a woman's place in a male dominated world. Although critics disagree over whether this novel displays proto-feminist ideas or reinforce patriarchal system. Elizabeth Earmnath has criticized it for not perpetuating the idea of feminism and for not giving her protagonist any sense of full achievement. But George Eliot can be defended against this charge as

the novel is profoundly sympathetic to the plight of woman. It may be called a feminist work because the novel begins and ends with Maggie. And the novel having a leading female character lends itself to feminist interpretations. As Alice Walker puts it,

“You acting womanish”, that is, like a woman usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous, or willful behavior...woman is to feminist as purple is to lavender.”[2]

Poetic Content

The novel is about a girl, Maggie Tulliver, who goes through great mental trauma due to the opposition by a society that practices double standard – one for men and other for women. Even as a child, she is a victim of gross gender discrimination. The Chapter II of Book I throws light on the different treatment meted out to her. Her brother is sent to a school by her father, Mr. Tulliver where he will receive better education and be “a sort o’engineer or a surveyor or an auctioneer and Vallyer, Like Riley, or one o’them smartish business as are all profits and no outley.”[3]. While she is forced to go on with her patchwork like a little lady:

“Oh dear, oh, dear Maggie, what are you thinkin’ of, to throw your bonnet down there... do, for shame, an’ come an’ go on with your patch work like a little lady”(7).

Right from her childhood she has sensed the gross gender discrimination women has to undergo in a society that has one law for men and another for women. She remembers how men could lead a life of their choice with impunity, while women are jeered at and looks down upon if they show any deviation from the assigned roles set by the society for them. In the novel, When Maggie elopes with Stephen; Stephen Guest with his unconventional behavior stands out from the traditional society. His behavior never invites any censure or disapproval from the society. In other words, nobody in the society blames him for his wrong deed because he is a male and being a male his action may be forgiven. But when it comes to Maggie, it was a different story. People are shocked and disapprove of Maggie’s action as she elopes with Stephen Guest and come back without marrying. Not only the world but also her own brother does not accept her and relegates her. The following discourse between Tom Tulliver and Maggie Tulliver clearly highlights the plight of a woman who is socially out casted:

“Tom, she began, faintly, ‘I am come back to you-I am come back home-for refuge-to tell you everything.’”

‘You will find no home with me, he answered, with tremulous rage. ‘you have been curse to your best friends...I wash my hands of you forever. You don’t belong to me.’”

“Tom, said Maggie, with more courage; I am perhaps not so guilty as you believe me to be. I never meant to give away to my feelings. I struggled against them. I was carried too far in the boat to come back on Tuesday. I come back as soon as I could.”

‘I can’t believe in you any more’, said Tom roughly, ‘you shall not come under my roof. It is enough....the sight of you is hateful to me’(42).

The above discourse raises a question in the reader’s mind and they are forced to think why always women are punished not men? Through this incident, the novelist has tried to draw the reader’s attention to the major problem of women i.e. males do not understand females.

George Eliot protests the society which prejudices female. For example, in the novel, after the death of Mr. Tulliver, Tom wants to support his family by taking up a job but he is told by Mr. Deane that his education is of no good in business and he must learn book-keeping. At this time Maggie expresses her wish: "If he had taught me book-keeping by double entry and after the Italian method, as he did Lucy Bertram, I could teach you, Tom" (205), but Tom's prejudice against women is evident as he is intolerant at her wish and accuses Maggie of being vain and conceited; and scolds her as following:

'You're always setting yourself up above me and everyone else, and I've wanted to tell you about it several times. You ought not to have spoken as you did to my uncle and aunts-you should leave it to me to take care of my mother and you, and not put yourself forward. You think of know better than anyone, but you're almost always wrong. I can judge better than you can.' (142).

This incident also refers to another problem of women i.e. they are deprived of education.

There are several instances in the novel which highlight the issue that patriarchy does not let women show their depth of knowledge. Male dominated society restricts them, if they try to show their intelligence in order to seek some appreciation from others. For example, in the Chapter III of Book I, when Maggie shows the depth of her knowledge to Mr. Riley, and talks of devils, her father sends her away by remarking:

"a woman's no business wi' being so clever; it'll turn to trouble, I doubt..." (10).

The above remark made by Mr. Tulliver clearly points towards another problem of women i.e. men do not want women to be more clever than himself because they want to dominate them and wish them to be submissive. That's why he does not want his daughter to be intelligent and devalues her obvious intelligence. At one place, he scolds her:

"Go, go!-shut up the book, and let's hear no more 'o such talk. It is as I thought -the child 'ull learn more mischievly nor good wi the books-Go, go and see after your mother"(10).

In response to this, Maggie holds her doll topsy-turvy, and crushes its nose against the wood of the chair. This behavior has received harsh criticism of the feminist critics. Auerbach believes Maggie to be connected with "Much Demonic"[4]. But her behavior can be defended. Her behavior is not demonic rather it demonstrates a woman's desire for independence. In reality, her behavior shows her suppressed revolt against the restriction of the patriarchal society.

The feminist in George Eliot forces her to protest against the social order of a patriarchal society, which ignores women's likes and dislikes. In *The Mill on the Floss*, Maggie does not want her hair to look pretty. She only wants people to think her a clever little girl and not to find fault with her. But everybody criticizes her, and leaves no chance to humiliate her. Even her mother scolds her in the following manner:

"Maggie", said Tulliver, 'go and get your hair brushed-do, for shame. I told you not to come in without going to Martha first; you know I did'(51).

Though the above remark shows the mother's concern for her daughter that her daughter should look pretty, yet it is, undoubtedly, a restriction on her freedom of her likes or dislikes.

Furthermore, the novel criticizes the patriarchal society which considers female as inferior. In the society, Female is considered fool and good for nothing. They believe that woman is meant only for household chores because they are unable to do witty works. Incase they succeed in doing any witty work; they are criticized and made fun of by the male

society. For example, in the chapter I of Book II, when Maggie comes to visit her brother, Tom Tulliver, and stays there for a few days. She gets much interested in Tom's lessons. While Tom finds that his life has become complicated with Latin grammar and Elucid's geometry. Maggie wants to help him with a little air of patronizing consolation because she knows the the Latin grammar which is learnt by her own effort. But being a part of male society, instead of appreciating her effort, he ridicules her offer of help:

'You help me, you silly little thing!' said Tom, "I should like to see you doing one of my lessons, why, I learn Latin too! Girls never learn such things. They're too silly." (125)

Tom is not the only one who devalues or ignores her efforts in study but Mr. Stanley, the tutor of Tom, also dilutes the importance of her efforts. He is also of the view that the females are foolish and quick in every action which is the brand of inferiority. They can not grasp the entire matter, but pick up a little of thing. In the words of Mr. Stelling:

'They can pick up a little of everything, I daresay,' said Mr. Stelling. 'They've a great deal of superficial cleverness; but they couldn't go far into anything. They're quick and shallow...' (130)

At this remark, Tom laughs and says:

'Ha, ha! Miss Maggie!' said Tom, 'You see it's not such a fine thing to be quick. You'll never go far into anything, you know'. (131)

The above remark, made by Tom, clearly indicates the pathetic condition of a woman whose dark future is predicted by a male.

In the novel, George Eliot seems to protest those men who do not respect women and never yield to their exhortations or entreaties. Mr. Tulliver represents this category. He has the marital habit of not listening very closely to his wife. At one place, in the novel, he himself admits to Mr. Riley that he has intentionally married a weak minded woman so that he should not be deprived of the right of self assertion in his house which shows that a man wants not a wife but a slave who could act as per her master's command:

'I picked the lady because she wasn't o'er' cute-bein' a good-looking woman too, an' come of a rare family for managing; but I picked her from her sister's o'purpose, 'cause she was a bit weak.' (12).

There are several instances in the novel which prove that all along Mrs. Tulliver has been playing the role of the wife to keep Mr. Tulliver happy and satisfied. Despite her reluctance, she has to continue serving him. She is completely dominated by her husband and hardly consulted in his business matter. Once when she urges him not to go to law in his dispute with Mr. Pivart by saying: "Well, Mr. Tulliver, do as you like, but whatever you do, don't go to law". (136) her advice only stiffens him in his purpose to launch a law-suit against his enemy. It's because abiding by a woman's advice is below to his dignity. If he does so, that means, he is spoiling the male's culture. Mr. Tulliver is a typical patriarchal gold fish which "retains to the last its youthful illusion that it can swim in a straight line beyond the encircling glass". (62)

Mrs. Tulliver's has been criticized by the feminist critics for ridiculous behavior which she shows when all her family belongings and goods are being sold by auction because her husband is declared a bankrupt. She cannot bear the thought of losing the household articles. She indulges in a lot of foolish and sentimental talks about these household possessions. But she can be defended because of two things. First, she is uneducated and a woman of weak intellect. Secondly, she does not have any means to support herself. Therefore, there is nothing irrelevant in her behavior. Through

the portrayal of this character, George Eliot has only highlighted the predicament of an uneducated and helpless woman.

In the novel, Philip Wakem evolves as an embodiment of the qualities that a woman would justifiably value in the opposite sex: he is a flagrant example of a woman's man. Philip suffers from a serious physical deformity. He is hunch back not from birth certainly but as a result of some accident. His physical deformity makes him inferior. Tom often teases him by using the word "girl" for him. In the chapter IV of book II, he ridicules him with words as given below:

"You know I won't hit you, because you're no better than a girl" (151).

The use of the word 'girl' for a deformed male does not reflect the pathetic condition of a male; rather it denotes the pathetic situation of a woman. And the female readers are forced to think that society considers a woman equal to a deformed male. She does not occupy an equal position to a male. Through the portrayal of this character, George Eliot has succeeded in portraying the position of a woman in a patriarchal society.

The character Mr. Moss also underscores the difficult social situation of women. Men deal with various minor and major problems related to money. Women, however, are even in a more precarious situation. They have far less earning power than men do, and it is practically necessary that they have a man's support. The range of social possibilities is much narrower for women than for men. For examples, Mr. Moss's wife and his six female children have to depend upon his meager salary to survive. Even when her brother, Mr. Tulliver, who is in financial need, comes to take her husband's help, she shows her inability to help him.

The situation for woman whose husband dies without leaving her sufficient means to support herself is more miserable. In case of Mrs. Tulliver, she has no other option of surviving except being the governess of Lucy after the death of Mr. Tulliver. Not only for a widow but also for a socially ostracized woman, it is very difficult to find a vocation. Maggie, the protagonist, has to face lots of difficulties in finding a vocation when she is ostracized by her family and her friends. She decides to carry her problem to Dr. Kenn and says to him:

"The only thing I want is some occupation that will enable me to get my bread and be independent".(437).

But in spite of his best efforts, Mr. Kenn fails to find a job for Maggie in St. Ogg's. The reasons are obvious – first, she is a girl. Second, she is looked down upon as a fallen woman. And in a traditional society, it is an arduous task to find a job for such a girl. Finally she is forced to work as a governess of Mr. Kenn's children.

Several instances in the novel prove Maggie's poignant awareness of the inequality women had to reconcile with under compulsion. The drudgery of performing the countless household chores makes their life miserable and when this goes unrecognized, it makes them all the more miserable. She is disgusted at the duties performed by her. She herself calls the household chores foolish, boring and frustrating: "It's foolish work", said Maggie, with the toss of her mane- 'tearing things to pieces to sew'em together again. It's boring...I don't want to do it "(7). The novel succeeds in drawing the sympathy of the female readers to the miserable condition and suffering of the female characters of the novel. They seem to be transgressing their situation but are unable to do due to their limited means. The major cause of their helplessness is the lack of education which causes their economic dependence on men and their impulsive nature.

Furthermore, George Eliot rebels the patriarchal society which considers itself self- righteous and supreme power. Tom is the representative of the patriarchal society. He is vain and conceited and no regrets for anything. Maggie acts impulsively and rashly and then regrets what she has done. But Tom is always self-righteous, always of the view that what

he does is right and proper. He drives away his innocent loving sister from his doors, and feels righteous because he has saved, he thinks, family honor. Even he does not think of the intense agony and suffering he has caused to that loving and self-sacrificing soul. Tom himself has internalized the role of a patriarchal figure whose job is to punish aberrant behavior. At one place, he says: I'll take care of her, keep her as a housekeeper and punish for her aberrant behavior because I am a boy. (267). we are clearly meant to become angry at this pronunciation and know automatically that the pronunciation is wrong.

Tom is of the view that Maggie is definitely inferior to him simply because she is a girl. He always condemns her sister and treats her as an inferior creature. For example, in the novel, when Maggie comes to know that Tom's rabbit are died due to her carelessness, she offers him financial help for purchasing more rabbit, but he humiliates her by making gender specific speech:

I don't want your money, you silly thing, I've got a great deal more money than you, because I'm a boy. I always have half-sovereigns and sovereigns for my Christmas boxes because I shall be a man and you only have five-shilling pieces, because you're only a girl. (26)

Her brother's insulting behavior makes Maggie unloved and unwanted leading to a sense of alienation and estrangement. Devoid of love and security, she wants to be loved and cared. George Eliot writes, "I think it was that her eyes were full of unsatisfied intelligence, and unsatisfied beseeching affection.

In this novel, George Eliot seems to be raising the issues of repression of women and protesting against the male society which commands a woman. For example, in the chapter 5 of Book V, when Tom comes to know about the secret meeting of Philip, he becomes furious and threatens to tell their father of her secret meeting unless she tells him 'everything that has passed between her and Philip'. After hearing the matter, he rebukes her and compels her to promise that she would never meet Philip again. To quote Tom's words:

"Now, then Maggie, there are two courses for you to take; either you vow solemnly to me, with your hand on my father's Bible, that you will never have another meeting with Philip Wakem, or you refuse, and I tell my father everything...(302)."

The above remark draws the reader's attention to the problem of females that they do not have freedom to take their own decision.

Thus, the novel throws light on the gender ideology of the Victorian Era and provides a survey of the position of women in the society. The novel highlights the sufferings of a woman which she has to undergo in a traditional society. The patriarchal society implants in women's mind that they are a liability, so they should live within the boundary of social convention. The idea that Maggie is a liability to her parents is deeply implanted in her mind as a child. Her mother's adoration of her son at her daughter's cost is rallying port for the novelist to bring her feminist ideas together. Her mother considers her daughter as cited from the discourse between her and her sisters:

"a much naughtie' and silly than her brother... not like Lucy" (96).

This blatant condemnation leads to a sense to insecurity and hatred towards her mother, and her resultant rebellious nature. In this connection, her mother is typical of most mothers.

The novel narrates the inner conflict of a young woman who finds herself unable to conform to the rigidity of the

social conventions. As Walter Allen puts it, "Maggie seeks to break through the meshes of the boring, monotonous, humdrum, routine, commonplace, conventional social pattern into which she has been born and with which she expected to enter into subservient terms. It is with all this that she feels most painfully out of harmony. The pent up poetry in her soul beats its luminous wings against conservatism, of the long-established provincial society within which she is confined. [5]"

The following discourse of Maggie to Philip clearly highlights that mighty opposites contend within her, Maggie is likewise at war against confining pressures outside herself:

"I was never satisfied with a little of anything... That's why it is better for me to do without earthly happiness altogether. I never felt that I had enough music-I wanted more instruments playing together-I wanted voice to be fuller and deeper." (291).

The novel reflects on the suffering of Maggie, caused by the social norms. This lends the novel to feminist interpretation. As Rashmi Rajpal puts it, "A feminist novel revolves around the suffering of a woman who suffers in different ways –mentally, physically, and sexually.[6]" Maggie suffers intensely both as a child and as a grown up girl. As a child, she has suffered on account of the constant scolding of her mother, the harshness and unkindness of her uncles and aunts, a complete want of sympathy in any quarter with her aspirations, and above all, the indifference and callousness of Tom whom she adored and loved. Commenting upon Maggie's suffering as a child, the novelist observes:

"These bitter sorrows of childhood! when sorrow is new and strange , , when hope has not yet got wings to fly beyond the days and weeks, and space from summer to summer seems measureless" (279).

Maggie's suffering becomes more bitter and painful when she grows up. Her more painful conflict follows when she falls in love with Stephen Guest. The situation becomes very complicated when she finds that she still loves Philip, but this love is based on her sympathy for him. Her love for Stephen is passionate. She could not continue meeting Philip because of Tom's objections, and she can not love Stephen with an easy heart because of his already being almost engaged to her cousin Lucy. She finds it difficult to take a decision whether to marry Stephen or not. She has to fight a hard battle. On the one hand, she craves for a fulfillment of the desire of the senses and the heart; on the other hand, she realizes the imperative need of complete renunciation and self-sacrifice. With a supreme effort of will, she conquers the temptation and decides to follow the path of renunciation. The step of renouncing Stephen for the sake of Philip and Lucy is almost heart rending and the most pathetic from the reader's point of view. She replies to the pleadings of Stephen in the following manner:

"Oh, I can't do it, Stephen-don't ask me-don't urge me. I can't argue any longer. I don't know what is wise, but my heart will not let me do it....I cannot marry you." (420).

"I will bear it and bear it till death..." (453).

Maggie's renunciation has received much criticism. Elizabeth Earnath has criticized George Eliot for not letting her heroine achieve self-fulfillment; and for letting her heroine renounce and sacrifice because, these two concepts i.e. renunciation and sacrifice, seem undoubtedly giving in. But Gillian Beer is of the view that renunciation and sacrifice, in Maggie's case, is related with her own independence and selfhood. To quote Gillian Beer's words:

"Renunciation in George Eliot is linked with independence and is perhaps the only independence possible to a woman in Maggie's situation." [7]

A mature Maggie shuns extremes and takes a practical view of the circumstances. She is neither the typical liberated woman nor an orthodox one. George Eliot does not let her get over whelmed by the western feminism or its militant concept of emancipation. In the quest for the wholeness of identity, she does not advocate separation from the patriarchal society but a tactful assertion of one's identity within the patriarchal society. The final scene which describes the Stephen Guest's and Lucy's visit to the tomb of Maggie clearly indicates that Maggie has achieved her identity and her respect. The tomb bears the name of Tom and Maggie Tulliver, and below the names it is written, "In their death they were not divided"(459).

The novelist's description of the moment "living through again in one supreme moment, the days when they had third-rate school, with tedium and drudgery for companions,... rather than remain under Tom's control"(458) abolishes the history of discrimination between boy and girl.

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CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, through the character of Maggie, Tom, Mrs. Tulliver, Mr. Tulliver, and most of the characters, George Eliot has tried to give a fairly complete picture of the issues of women such as education and professional opportunity. Like *Middlemarch*, this novel has also been criticized for not propagating the idea of feminism. But the novel can be defended against this feminist critique as it undoubtedly deals with the sufferings of women; and it is a lament about the inequality of gender roles. Although it is not a formal feminist work, yet it has a greater consciousness raising effect than a more straightforwardly "feminist" storyline would do. It is hoped that this extended study of a highly interesting literary and critical movement may open new windows for further scholarly and academic researches to pursue the same topic.

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